

## COLUMNISTS

# Can you hear the doves?

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In the upstairs bedroom at my grandparents' small house on South Seventh Street here in Abilene the windows would be open in the evening and morning as we grandchildren slept. I remember waking to the plaintive call of Mourning Doves in the trees on the estate just east across Highland. That sound will always mean the hush of morning to me.

As a young homeowner in Lubbock, I heard a new call – more rapid, shorter, more urgent – and learned to spot Inca Doves in the spring when they called unceasingly. I was fascinated with their neat, scaly backs, diminutive size and sudden glimpse of cinnamon under the wing when they flew.

One of the most charming sights in wintertime on a sunny dry afternoon is the Inca Huddle. After they have fed, the Incas assemble on the sunny south-side mulch under my Queen Elizabeth grand rose bush. They would look like cobblestones if they were absolutely still, but at any time somebirdy is preening or has a bright rust-colored underwing raised to the sun.

The first time I saw the flash of a White-winged Dove's flight, we were driving to Tucson's Saguaro National Forest and took the very next exit off to get a better look. Not until I moved here to Abilene many years later did I learn their "Who-cooks-for-you?" call, though now I hear it more often than any other in my yard.

Recently, I've begun hearing a hoarser, less melodic call: Eurasian Collared Doves have begun to appear in Abilene. An escaped but now established species, they are so much larger than the others, lighter-colored, yet with a distinctive black band around the back of the neck.

I can see all four of these species at my backyard feeders. In a crowd on a fall morning, there might be 30 big White-wings, three even bigger Collared Doves, a dozen tiny Incas and a couple of medium-sized freckled Mourners. The little Incas often avoid the shouldering when the White-wings are around. They will feed earlier or later.

Doves prefer seed on a flat surface. Relatively heavy for their leg strength, they trundle busily on the ground instead of clinging to feeders. When sparrows and finches are working down through a tube feeder, the doves will be picking up what the little birds scatter. If a dove attempts to perch on the tube feeder, the flailing that ensues must surely waste more calories than are consumed.

Even if doves seem very busy at feeding time, they remain alert and rocket into the air at the least interruption. There is a great whir of wings and then maybe one sees a few fleeing silhouettes. Doves can reach speeds better than 40 mph in straight flight and are very maneuverable, as any hunter can tell you. That our wintering neighborhood Cooper's Hawk can catch them in flight is no small feat.

If you enjoy watching birds and learning more about them, come join the Big Country Master Naturalists out at Abilene State Park on Saturday, Sept. 21. At 9 a.m. there will be a birding program and a bird blind hike.

The Master Naturalists are also hosting a Star Party complete with telescopes that evening from 8-11 p.m. near the CCC building at the park.

Be sure to check out our local chapter on Facebook at BCTXMN for event details and updates.

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